

RADIO SCOTLAND: A SHORT SURVEY

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INTRODUCTION: The Position of Scotland in the Media

It has been said that Scotland was "the last nation in Europe, if not the world, to acquire its own radio service".⁽¹⁾ This immediately begs an important question. Within most broadcasting media infrastructures, Scotland is very far from having the status of a nation. BBC Scotland represents a particular *region* within the BBC; though the actual term used is "national region" which sounds suspiciously like a contradiction in terms. ITV works on a federal system: Scottish Television competes on ostensibly equal terms with Yorkshire, Granada and the rest, an arrangement which Gus MacDonald, Director of Programmes for Scottish Television, feels is fair in essence but possibly disadvantageous to Scotland in practice. The independent radio network is not in the business of broadcasting to nations: their various stations in Scotland, including Radio Clyde, Radio Forth and Radio Tay officially have a forty-mile limit on their transmitters (although Clyde can be and is picked up on the other side of the open space of the Atlantic).

There is only one broadcasting institution which purports to speak to and for the whole country, seven days a week, at least 12 hours a day; and that is Radio Scotland, the self-designated "national network".

BBC and ILR

Radio Scotland then claims to see Scotland as an entity, cultural, geographical and perhaps even political, and sets itself up to provide a broadcasting service for that entity. Given the traditions and practices of the BBC, two problems instantly spring to mind. The first is that here is an institution claiming autonomy in name but which is in reality entirely linked to and subject to BBC Headquarters in London. The second is that the BBC's radio strategy, at least for the past forty or so years, has been that of audience streaming, broadcasting to communities of interest rather than wide geographical communities (local radio, a recent development, targets its catchment areas much more precisely). Radios One, Two, Three and Four know pretty well *who* they are catering for. Who is Radio Scotland to

cater for? And is "the Scots" a sufficiently strong answer?

It is in this area that Independent Local Radio (ILR) has a much easier task. This chapter will concentrate on the development of Radio Scotland; but it should be remembered that the biggest radio success story of the past decade has been in the independent sector. Radio Clyde's popularity with public and therefore advertisers has been such that they have been able to finance for themselves the only custom-built radio studios to be constructed in Britain in the last 50 years, at a cost of £2½ million. Clyde will be referred to at various points below: Radio Scotland was started very much in its wake, and it was considered by many that the BBC was trying to "beat the commercial stations at their own game".⁽²⁾ Radio Clyde, however, benefits from its luxurious, well-equipped studios, while Radio Scotland, particularly in Edinburgh, struggles with cramped conditions and poor equipment. Radio Clyde also has a far more homogeneous catchment area, which it has certainly exploited with aggressively effective imagination. It has the concomitant advantage of small size (total staff of about 70) and flexibility, emphasised in its daily working life. Free from the institutional dead weight of the BBC, it has made its own structures at least apparently more democratic. It pays high wages – on a par with those on offer in television, always a more lucrative field than radio. It has also chosen to dispense with unions – there is little specialisation, producers being their own presenters, their own technicians.

The report of the Peacock Committee and the government's perceived view that advertising might be carried on the BBC (with Radio One and Two, which Peacock suggests selling off, being in the front line for any such development) are however causing some alarm to Independent Local Radio Stations. Despite its success, Radio Clyde, in common with its smaller colleagues, is suffering from a lack of growth in advertising revenue. It does look though in the wake of the Peacock Report and the mixed reception given to it, as if the present status quo will be maintained for quite some time yet.

The Importance of Radio Scotland

Radio Scotland has had both the distinction and the burden of purporting to represent its country. Before its inauguration, in late 1978, hopes inevitably ran high, but were speedily dashed as soon as it became clear just what the new station was going to be like. I intend here to look at some aspects of the evolution of the "national network" of a non-nation: a network whose early debacle coincided with the debacle of the devolution referendum to the point where irate letter-writers to *The Scotsman* were

calling it "Teddy Taylor's secret weapon", and where the editor of the *Scottish Review* was moved to remark: "Wide dissatisfaction with the poor quality of much of its output(...) leaves little doubt that the sudden revelation of how sheerly awful Scottish mindlessness could be was another weapon on behalf of the "No" side."⁽³⁾

SOME BACKGROUND: The Situation Before 1978

The centralisation of programmes, especially serious programmes and news, in London – which can be dated from 1939 with the creation of the Third Programme⁽⁴⁾ – had obviously long been a matter of some grievance in Scotland. A Saltire Society report of 1946 bemoaned the general lack of and poor quality of Scottish features – and added, in a fit of the self-doubting paranoia which may have returned to haunt the early listeners to Radio Scotland: "There is a question whether there is not perhaps missing from the typical Scottish make-up the adaptability and easy manner before a microphone which seems to come naturally to English people."⁽⁵⁾

Over ten years later, similar complaints were being made in the *Saltire Review*: complaints about the trivialisation of Scottish material, about the assumption that serious discussion or news coverage is somehow not Scottish, about the "horrifying familiarity of almost every programme."⁽⁶⁾ An SNP report of the same year highlighted the same issues, but considered it part of a plot to maintain the Tory and Labour parties in power. And of course, all of this was happening at a time when radio was still by far the most widely available broadcast medium.

Alternatives did emerge to the BBC monopoly, but they were precarious or illegal. Radio Free Scotland impressed listeners and journalists by its audacity in transmitting nationalist material through the early sixties; while the first Radio Scotland, in the mid-sixties, was a pirate station, a boat anchored offshore, lively but short-lived.

During the 1970s, there was a crescendo of calls for local radio franchises which the government was offering. At one stage *The Scotsman* reported that there could be "200 applicants for local franchises in Scotland".⁽⁷⁾ In the event there was only one – Edinburgh – and it failed due to lack of support.

Scotland was left with a radio service emanating from London, with certain Scottish appendages – notably, education, religion and drama. It was far from ideal. As Stewart Conn, now Senior Producer of drama for Radio Scotland has explained⁽⁸⁾, under the opt-out system he and his colleagues *either* had to produce for the whole of Britain and therefore with

English sensibilities in mind (no difficult dialects, for example); or produce plays they felt specifically suited to Scotland and block out the Radio 4 coverage while broadcasting them (there being only one wavelength available.)

It was against this background of dissatisfaction, the feeling of being stuck in a rut of second-best, and against the prevailing mood of pre-devolution optimism and national aspiration, that the new Radio Scotland was conceived.

THE BIRTH OF RADIO SCOTLAND

Instantly, there were those who felt that this particular conception should never have been allowed to come to term. There had been much debate about what form the new Radio Scotland would take. Would it be like Radio 2? like Radio 4? a "mother ship" for local stations, as one member of the broadcasting council suggested? The form it did take was something of a Frankenstein's monster: hulking, ham-fisted, well-meaning in intent but, in the view of many, teetering between destructive and laughable in practice.

The man appointed as Head was John Pickles, who had been working as station manager at BBC Oxford. He quickly made clear what he envisaged. In a preview entitled "Hail Ceilidhdonia", he was reported as declaring: "We have got to come down from our pedestal".⁽⁹⁾ He announced schedules including radio bingo, one-arm bandit quizzes and The Tartan Terror Show (a frighteningly awful concoction, still going strong). The formats for the main daily programmes were as follows: music and consumer questions; music and entertainment; music and chat; music and current affairs(!); and music and chat again.

It was clearly a desperate attempt to court popularity, a desperate attempt to be the proverbial and impossible all things to all men. Within a few days, even hours, it was the listeners who were desperate. Below is presented a small array of some of the comments greeting the new programmes and policies. It should be stressed that there has been no selective editing here, no painstaking search for the negative: complaints, sometimes of astonishing virulence, flooded in. The Scottish press had never before acted as such a forum for views on radio; and it was bitterly disappointing that the awakened interest should be so wholly damning. Defenders of Radio Scotland, most notably of course John Pickles, responsible for setting the tone as well as the content of the proceedings, were eager to point out the over-hastiness of the reaction (some of the

criticisms which follow were issued *before* the station came on air). Undoubtedly, there was an element of "how-can-the-BBC-descend-to-this" snobbishness in some of the criticism; there was also a real sense of anger at a squandered opportunity. The foundations of the criticism rested on the perceived vulgarity and triviality of the programmes, and particularly on the confused and parochial news presentation – this "new-look" format had already been given a trial run before the station proper started up in the last week of November 1978.

A Few Comments

– "If the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra were even making a token appearance in Radio Scotland's opening concert, I would be more confident that it was the dawn and not the twilight of responsible radio in Scotland."⁽¹⁰⁾

– "Some august member of the BBC hierarchy should tell Mr Pickles that the corporation is not in business to play bingo. In fact, this tawdry innovation merely illustrates the disgusting way in which the BBC is whoring around like an aging prostitute trying to seduce clients from the commercial broadcasters by offering them even more vulgar delights."⁽¹¹⁾

– "As well as being too inward-looking, Radio Scotland is much too anodyne... The central question of whether it will become a national service – embracing the world – or a local anaesthetic – soothing its listeners – remains to be answered."⁽¹²⁾

– "This Radio Kailyard or Back Green Calling is what Hugh MacDiarmid at his deadliest called "an ugly bird without wings", a speckled hen whose horizon goes no further than the end of the little minister's glebe(...). There is an ugly German word, "Verduemming". It means: the making stupid of someone. Is the new sound of Queen Margaret Drive the noise of a Verduemmingsmachine in first gear?"⁽¹³⁾

– "...our hamming, shamming Radio Scotland. (...)

Don't let his learning put you off,

He's just oor ain wee tartan Prof."

(Proposed jingle for Radio Scotland.)⁽¹⁴⁾

Maurice Lindsay's comment about the "sudden revelation of how sheerly awful Scottish mindlessness could be", quoted in the Introduction will also be recalled, as will the notion that the abysmal failure of the new schedules to live up to even the most modest expectations sapped Scottish

confidence in Scottish ability and seriousness at a time – that of the devolution referendum – when that confidence might have been most needed.

The list of criticisms could extend and extend. Let the above-quoted suffice to give an idea of the feelings aroused. (One line of defence was to protest that it was only professional critics and intellectuals who felt this way – the "ordinary" or "average" listener like the new programmes perfectly well. It seems at best a poor and at worst a grossly patronising line of argument). The prevailing sentiment was then that of an opportunity woefully missed; and to add to the woe, the wavelength changes introduced to bring Radio Scotland onto medium wave, thereby banishing Radio 4 to long wave, met with wide dissatisfaction too. A cartoon in *The Scotsman* depicts a distraught wife, a tear on her cheek, in front of the wireless, lamenting: "I've twiddled and twiddled, but it's nae use – I still get Radio Scotland".⁽¹⁵⁾

In fact, the difficulties over poor reception of Radio 4 on Light Wave forced some early changes which were generally welcomed. *World at One*, which for a time had been blocked out by a farming programme (good idea but very bad time) was restored to medium wave, and plays and concerts were scheduled for Monday and Thursday evenings. Any added cultural weight, Mr Pickles made clear, was not as a response to any criticism of programming policy, but an expedient measure to rectify an over-optimistic assessment of long wave reception throughout Scotland.

Despite these minor improvements, the critics continued to keep up the pressure. It was still felt that the mix of programming – admittedly, as stated above, a complex task given the size and diversity of the geographical community – had not yet even begun to get the balance right: not so much all things to all men, as "a crash course in audience alienation."⁽¹⁶⁾

In the midst of all this, an event occurred which, in retrospect, seems in keeping with the character of those times. The duty announcer in Glasgow, Robert Sproul-Cran, received an internal call saying that the Queen was dead. Deciding to check, he did not broadcast the message. John Pickles and his assistant Les Robinson, the perpetrators of the "joke", were relieved of their duties. It was less than a year since the birth of Radio Scotland.

A FRESH START

Clearly, a change of gear and mood was needed. (It is tempting to

speculate what would have happened if the "Queen is dead" message *had* been broadcast by a less thorough or experienced announcer: might it have brought the London axe which was certainly poised over Radio Scotland at that time crashing down?) A new Head of Radio Scotland, Chris Irwin, was named in April 1980. In the early months of that year, Pat Ramsay, the controller of BBC Scotland, and Pat Walker, his assistant (as well as Chris Irwin, already in line for his new appointment) would have had at their disposal at least three pieces of documentary proof of the problems they faced. The first was an internal report, supposedly secret but widely leaked. The second was a survey done by a BBC audience research team from London. The third was the latest set of audience statistics.

a) The Internal Report

News of a highly critical report compiled by Bob Atkins, a senior producer with the World Service, appeared in September 1979. A notice appeared on Radio Scotland notice-boards stating that "there will be more talk and less blether and there will be a move away from wallpaper music." Pat Ramsay announced further changes, recognising that Radio Scotland had failed to attract large audiences or to generate "that enthusiasm which legitimises small audiences."⁽¹⁷⁾

b) The Survey

The results of this survey were summarised in *The Scotsman* in December 1979. While some caution might be thought necessary before attaching too much importance to the conclusions of a visiting team from London, unfamiliar with the daily context of Scottish listening – they did, for example get certain names and titles wrong – the survey nonetheless had some interesting points to make not only about specific programmes but also about wider questions of perception of national identity. The researchers stated, for instance that "an impression could be gained that these respondents showed an acute self-consciousness about their provincialism and it was as if Radio Scotland sometimes exposed that in a distressing way." Moreover – and particularly worrying for the aspirations of Radio Scotland: "While Scots clearly have a sense of national identity they do not – at least so far – seem to wish to identify this in terms of a radio station."¹⁸ This, if at all true, was surely the attitude which the post-Pickles regime had to alter.

c) The Audience Figures

By late 1979 the BBC was spending over £2 million a year on Radio

Scotland (its starting budget had been £750,000). Yet, at the end of its first year, the station still had fewer listeners in Scotland than Radio 4, and less than when Scottish programmes were an adjunct of Radio 4. Audience research figures presented by Pat Walker, Assistant Controller of BBC Scotland in December 1979 showed the average daily patronage, expressed as a percentage of the population, as follows:

Radio Scotland	4.6%
Radio 4	5.7%
Radio 1	18.8%
Radio 2	9.6%
Radio 3	Less than 1%
Radio Forth and Clyde	9.7% ⁽¹⁹⁾

That last figure for the independent stations might be put into clearer perspective if it is remembered that the Forth and Clyde transmitters officially have a radius of only 40 miles. A quick cross-reference to Clyde's own figures for earlier that year, for the West of Scotland, show their assessment for their listening area as follows:

Radio Clyde	46.89%
Radio 4	5.38%
Radio Scotland	5.88%

It should be said that these figures are uncontested, as the BBC did not supply their own for that period; but the general pattern in Strathclyde has been consistently and overwhelmingly in Clyde's favour – up to nine times greater than Radio Scotland's audience.

d) The Response

The new bosses of Radio Scotland, once accused of being a "look-alike" Clyde but patently without the success, decided in response to these poor figures and the comments contained in the internal report and the audience survey, to adopt a policy which still holds good in 1986: to place far greater emphasis on news and current affairs. This was one of the areas which had attracted the greatest criticism when the station had started: the news presentation, with its one presenter, its dilution by music in "Rhythm 'n' News" were widely seen as one of the grossest failures of vision and responsibility of Radio Scotland, providing, in the words of Neal Ascherson, only "a frosted window on the world".⁽²⁰⁾

In the re-vamped, tightened schedules now proposed for 1980, news

and current affairs would form the backbone of programming, being broadcast for anything up to 6 hours a day at a time when the total output was being reduced to about 70 hours a week. (It started with 90, and Pickles had hoped to push it up to 120 as soon as possible).

The Radio 4 element was increased; radio bingo was dropped; and by the second anniversary of Radio Scotland in 1980, things were, at last, beginning to look up. In response to one of Bob Atkins' criticisms *Good Morning Scotland*, the main early day news programme now had two presenters instead of one, and was reaching 125,000 listeners at any one time (a respectable amount in radio terms). A good mixed range of features was being presented; "minority" programmes were being developed, notably those catering for specific musical tastes, such as "Take the Jazz Train" and "Travelling Folk".

As against this, the "Tartan Terror Show" was still alarmingly present; and the programme which drew perhaps the greatest acclaim for Radio Scotland, indeed upon which a large part of its new worthy reputation was based, had next to nothing to do with Radio Scotland and was even rejected by them. "Odyssey" was a quite excellent series of oral history, conceived and produced by the writer and broadcaster Billy Kay – a freelance, who sold to the station the idea for which they received such praise. When, however, a second series was proposed, no-one it seemed had the energy or initiative (or, they claimed, the money) to take up the offer. It was only through the intervention of Stewart Conn, senior producer of drama, that Billy Kay was attached incongruously to the drama department, there to produce his entirely documentary series. Thanks to Conn's vision and action, and Kay's tenacity, the project survived; the second series was broadcast to further acclaim; it was commissioned for television and turned into a popular book; and Radio Scotland reaped the critical reward of that for which they had been unwilling to make space.

THE PRESENT

"The Tartan Terror Show" with its frenetic garbling of pseudo-Scottish chat ("waggle yer wellies, Granny, och aye" etc.etc.) is still firmly in place in the Radio Scotland schedules, dismaying many who inadvertently switch it on and presumably pleasing many others. Billy Kay is still firmly in place as one of Radio Scotland's most respected external contributors: his personal but thorough assessment of "The Scots Tongue", over 6 weeks, was one of the documentary highlights of 1986.

The anomalous mix subsists; but there is no doubt that Radio Scotland

has, in eight years, learned how to build on some of the talents available to it. In February 1983, Stan Taylor was appointed successor to Chris Irwin as Head of Radio Scotland. As a previous Head of news, Taylor has maintained and increased the importance of proper news reporting and analysis as the essential backbone of the station. "Focus", a current affairs investigative half-hour, has been reinstated *Newsweek* is an hour-long news review early on Saturday mornings. The depressing swathe of light music and chat in the afternoons has been broken up by – in this writer's opinion – the best discussion show on the wavelength, "Taking Issue With Colin Bell" the eponymous Bell, a political pundit, broadcaster and writer of considerable verve, has transformed the hour between two and three into an energetic and witty forum for matters of topical importance.

In other areas too, Radio Scotland has been edging forward out of the unhappy debacle of its birth. The BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, threatened with extinction, has not only been saved – it, or at least, three of its members, was the moving force behind *Classical Aid*, one of the many fund-raising efforts inspired by Bob Geldof's *Band Aid*. This ambitious event, staged at the Scottish Exhibition Centre in Glasgow, carried off two major prizes at the New York International Radio Festival.

Another recipient of awards has been the drama department. This small creative nucleus existed well before Radio Scotland; but with the increased possibilities now available to it in terms of programming (although not in terms of studio space or equipment), it has produced consistently thoughtful and occasionally excellent work. It is here perhaps that the advantages of the small scale of Radio Scotland operations can be seen to their best advantage. Radio 4, which broadcasts at least one play a day, receives its material through the medium of a script unit, whose purpose is solely to read and to pass scripts on to directors or to discard them. Radio Scotland can avoid this distancing, conveyor-belt approach. The staff of three or four read scripts personally, discuss them in detail with the writer, are in a position to offer commissions, and produce nothing to which they are not fully committed. For the writer, this collaborative process is highly helpful. Stewart Conn believes that the remit of his department is not only to produce good material for broadcast, but to support the infrastructure of Scottish creative life by their presence; and without exaggerating the *scale* of what they are able to do, he is justified in this belief.

There are other elements contributing to the station's gradual success. The education department which also, like drama, existed before Radio Scotland, and which also, like the BBC SSO, was threatened with the axe, continues to produce high quality material for Scottish schoolchildren

(giving additional employment to many Scottish-based writers and actors in the process). Documentary series have also been produced within that department and broadcast on "adult" Radio Scotland. The Talks and Features Department is also coming into its own. Programmes on the veterans of the Spanish Civil War, the hunger marchers of the 30s, the above-mentioned "Scots Tongue" and other such projects supplement the weekly cultural review "Prospect" and the programmes made for network (i.e. Radios 3 and 4). A Radio 3 "Scottish Season" in November 1984 was a showcase for Scottish production of music, drama, poetry, music, and talks. The critical reaction to this in England⁽²¹⁾ was, it must be said, cautious, but critics in Scotland, less taken up with issues of accent etc. considered the season to be made up of demanding and worthwhile work. The inevitable question, however, arose: why a season on Radio 3? Why can such productions not be scheduled in the normal weekly course of things on Radio Scotland?

The answer to that resides in the complexities of Radio Scotland's conception, and the fact that here, uniquely within the BBC, is a station serving a country which has to combine the various divided functions of Radios 1,2,3,4 and independent radio. It will be recalled that one of the earliest criticisms of Radio Scotland was of its lack of identity, its confusion of styles. In 1986 one of the ways in which a strong attempt has been made to create a cohesive corporate identity is to insist on its being called "the national network". (This is to some extent wishful thinking. As mentioned in the Introduction, the BBC designates Scotland as a "national region"). Along with this goes a new theme tune "Alba", a piece using symphony orchestra and bagpipes, composed by George MacIlwham and first heard in "Classical Aid".

In tandem with this increased emphasis on "national" identity, which it is hoped may surpass and gather together the various programming styles (somewhat wishful thinking also...), attempts are being made to develop the international perspective from that ostensibly strong Scottish base. "Triple Alliance" is a non-metropolitan discussion programme, seeking to explore issues in common to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, outside the usual BBC embrace of London. The executive producer responsible for that, Michael H Shaw, also plans to begin a world series - exchanging programmes directly with other countries.

THE FUTURE

The range and quality of the provision of programmes have greatly improved since 1978; it might sourly be said that they could hardly have got

worse. However, Radio Scotland has new obstacles to overcome, not entirely, this time, of its own making.

With Radio Clyde basking in its custom built studios in Clydebank, Radio Scotland is still muddling through with cramped space and often inadequate equipment, especially at the Queen Street premises in Edinburgh. The solution to this was going to be the big new BBC building in Edinburgh: a project already anticipated in 1978 when John Pickles was setting out his plans for the station. In 1986, with the licence fee being set at £58 instead of the requested £63, the BBC decided, to the horror of both its patient staff and the Edinburgh authorities, to cancel this long and eagerly-awaited development.

As part of the same cutbacks, Radio Scotland has been asked to "save" £500,000 a year, and also self-operated contribution studios which were going to be set up throughout Scotland to increase the democratic and geographically diverse input to programmes, have had to be curtailed.

Again, within the same cutbacks, staffing is being "rationalised" by uprooting the Edinburgh news and current affairs staff and sending them to the increasingly powerful and centralised Queen Margaret Drive in Glasgow.

With no new and vitally needed facilities; with a half million pound slash through the budget; and with gross under-representation in Scotland's capital, it's hard to envisage how Radio Scotland can establish itself as a respected force in the future.

Catherine Lockerbie, *The Scotsman*.

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